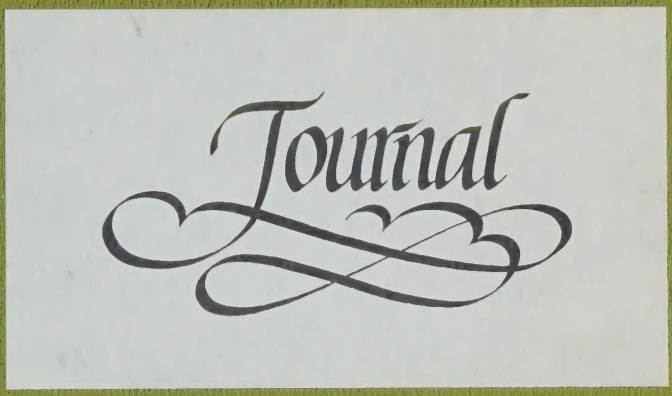
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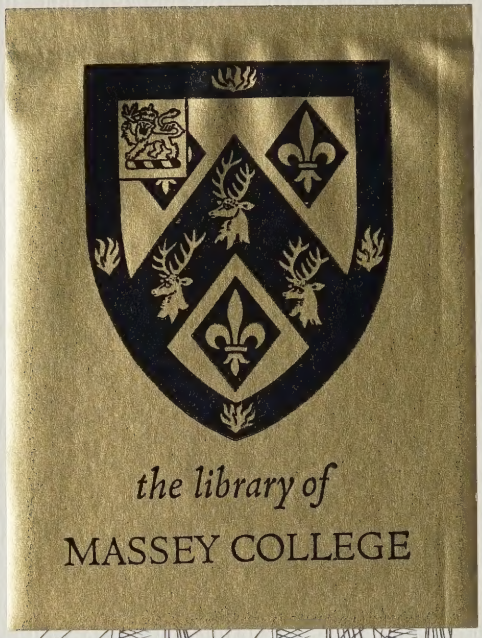
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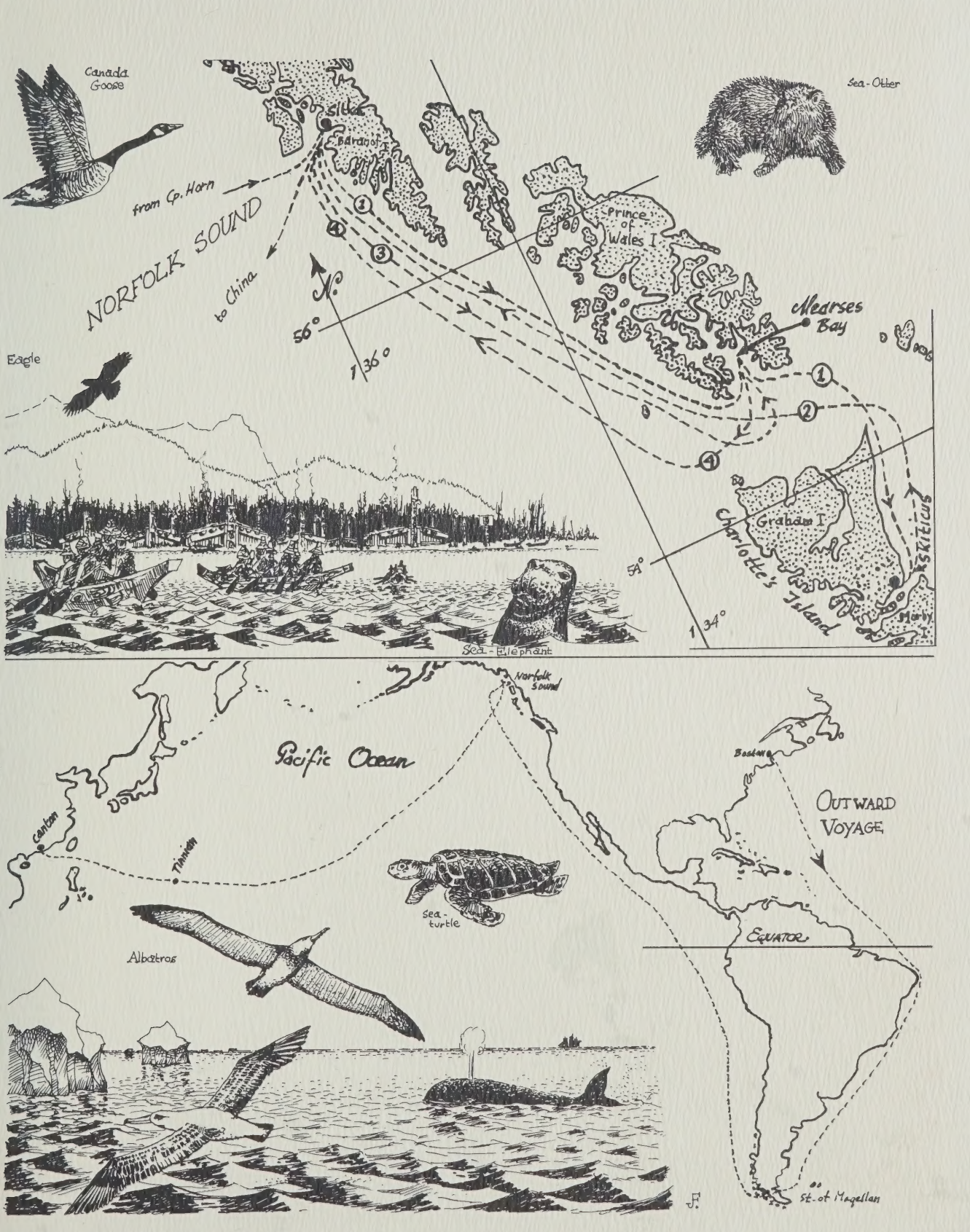
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Graham I
Charlotte's Island
Skidegas
Mary I.
54°
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Sea-Elephant
Norfolk Sound
Pacific Ocean
Canton
Tinian
Boston
OUTWARD VOYAGE
sea-turtle
EQUATOR
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St. of Magellan
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A SHORT ACCOUNT OF A NORTHWEST VOYAGE PERFORMED IN THE YEARS *1796, 1797, & 1798*

by

Ebenezer Johnson

With an Introduction by Basil Stuart-Stubbs
and Illustrations by Frits Jacobsen
Edited by M. S. Batts

THE ALCUIN SOCIETY
VANCOUVER, 1974

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INTRODUCTION

On arriving in China in December 1779 John Ledyard, the adventurous Connecticut sailor who served as corporal of the marines on Cook's last voyage, observed that the otter skins they had brought with them from the northwest coast of America "were of nearly double the value at Canton, as at Kamchatka." This observation appeared in Ledyard's account of the voyage which was published at Hartford in 1783, but it was a year later, in the official account, that James King expanded on Ledyard's casual remark with this prophetic statement: "... the advantages that might be derived from a voyage, to that part of the American coast, undertaken with commercial views, appear to me of a degree of importance sufficient to call for the attention of the Public."

As King's words were being printed, the foundations of Chinese-American commerce were being laid in Canton by the first American ship to visit that port, the *Empress of China* out of New York. Following the establishment of an American commercial house in Canton in 1786, profitable cargoes of tea, silk, and china began to return directly to New England, demonstrating that where oriental goods were concerned the United States had no further need for British and Dutch middlemen. One ingredient of trade was missing, however: a plentiful supply of a satisfactory medium of exchange. The single native commodity favoured by the Chinese, ginseng, was available only in limited quantity, and the revolutionary war had left the United States short of hard currency. The attention of Boston merchants quickly focussed on the tempting possibilities of a new trade route, set up on the basis suggested by Ledyard and formulated by King. Soon after the *Grand Turk* of Salem returned from China in 1787 bearing riches for its owners, six Boston shareholders contributed $50,000 to the outfitting of the *Columbia Rediviva* and the

Lady Washington. Sailing around Cape Horn, this northwest expedition for furs traded according to plan on the coasts of British Columbia and Alaska in 1788 and 1789 and in China in 1790. Although the *Columbia* returned to Boston with the distinction of being the first ship to carry the Stars and Stripes around the world, it did not bring wealth to the investors. The merchants were not discouraged, however, for the failure was understandable: the commander had proved to be dishonest, the original cargo had been unsuitable for trade with the Indians, and the trading was commenced too late in the season. The many expeditions that followed were to prove the soundness of the principle of the maritime fur trade, for they were the source of forty years of handsome profits for the merchants of New England.

What of the countrymen of Cook? Two vast monopolies existing through royal charters had saddled the British with a curious handicap. One monopoly, the South Sea Company, had exclusive rights of trade along the whole western coast of North and South America, and three hundred leagues into the ocean. The other, the East India Company, had similar privileges for all lands east of the Cape of Good Hope, and control of the import of Chinese goods into England. Therefore the South Sea Company had jurisdiction over the country supplying the furs, and the East India Company controlled the market. Any merchant successful in obtaining licenses from both companies, although he might sell furs for a profit in China, could not reinvest the profit in Chinese goods for transport to England. The whole purpose of trade was thereby defeated. Citizens of the United States were not bound by these strictures, and were able to pursue their own course with characteristic enterprise, eventually enjoying an almost exclusive monopoly along the trade route that led the ships of Boston around the world.

In brief these are the historical circumstances surrounding Ebenezer Johnson's *A Short Account of a Northwest Voyage Performed in the Years 1796, 1797 and 1798.* There is little remarkable about this voyage. By the time it took place the maritime fur trade was fairly well developed. The *India Packet* in which Johnson sailed had been preceded by a couple of dozen American ships and about forty British ships. No

new discoveries were made, no new regions mapped. Yet this account is a remarkable one in a number of ways. Contemporary accounts of voyages to the Pacific Northwest before 1800 are few in number. Accounts of American commercial expeditions are very scarce, and it is only during the last thirty years that many manuscript accounts have been discovered and published. Johnson's *Short Account* seems to be the sole example of a contemporarily published personal narrative arising from an American voyage in this period. It appeared in Massachusetts in 1798, the same year in which Vancouver's account was printed in London.

The distinguished naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison once observed that "no Richard Dana has told the story of the Nor-westmen from the foremast angle. Unless the records of our admiralty courts yield something, the common seaman's side is lost." This is precisely what Johnson gives us. More than any of the other accounts it is the story of the ordinary sailor, not well educated, not even experienced at sea. It is not surprising that Morison overlooked what seems to be the single exception to his generalization, for this little work appears to exist in only a handful of original copies, one of which is in the collection of the American Antiquarian Society, another in the Houghton Library at Harvard. It is a little known work, and little is known about it beyond what it tells us.

Who was Ebenezer Johnson? He confesses his youth, which he would have in common with most of his shipmates, for in those days the crews were made up predominantly of men in their teens and twenties. John Boit was a seventeen-year-old fifth mate when the Columbia River was discovered, and a nineteen-year-old master when he took his own sloop the *Union* around the world. But Boit was the well educated son of a merchant, able to write log books which are detailed, methodical, and well composed. Not so Johnson, whose style is clumsy, and whose grammar and spelling reveal the lack of formal education to which he admits: "Indulgent reader do not let me tire your patience with unnecessary prolixty for want of good stile being bread without it, and but little chance for improvement." He is simply a youthful deckhand away from home for the first time, amazed at the natural phenomena he encounters, angered by the cruel life at sea, eventually sickened by its hardships.

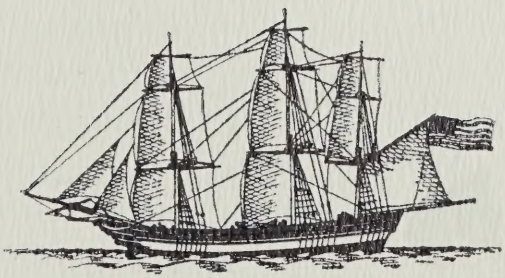
He concludes his brief narrative with an attempt at poetry in which the feeling is as sincere as the expression of it is stilted. One senses that he did not venture to sea again. In the annals of history his little book seems to be his only monument.

Information regarding the ship and its captain is equally sparse. The *India Packet* was built in Braintree, Massachusetts, in 1795, and at the time of Johnson's voyage was owned by Dorr and Sons of Boston. She was three-masted, square-sterned, and had two decks. Like most ships used for the northwest trade she was small, light, and of shallow draft, being eighty-eight feet long, twenty-four feet two inches wide, twelve feet one inch deep, and weighing about two hundred and twenty six tons. Captain Rogers, whom Johnson portrays as a rough tyrant, may be the same William Rogers who visited the coast in 1791 and 1794 as the commander of the British ship *Fairy*, for we know that Rogers brought the *Fairy* to Boston in 1795, where she was sold and renamed *Sea Otter*. Under that name she sailed again for the northwest, but not with Rogers as captain. Neither Rogers nor the *India Packet* seem to have paid a further visit to the coast.

Ebenezer Johnson returned to Boston with the ship on April 10, 1798, having been absent about a year and a half. His friends induced him to make public the diary which he kept on his journey. Its fifteen pages were set and somewhat crudely printed before the year's end, bearing the imprint "Massachusetts: Printed for the Author." If the young sailor was thus required to pay for its publication, it is fair to assume that only a few copies were printed, possibly for circulation to his interested friends. The country which Johnson described was still a mystery to those readers of 1798. A sense of mystery still clings to his words as they are set in type again one hundred and seventy-six years later. (Minor changes from the original and comments on the text are indicated by asterisks which refer to notes following the text.)

Basil Stuart-Stubbs, Librarian
The University of British Columbia

A SHORT ACCOUNT OF A NORTHWEST VOYAGE PERFORMED IN THE YEARS 1796, 1797 & 1798.



TO THE PUBLIC

METHINKS I hear the reader exclaim, that these few lines will not be acceptable to the Public. But when they have read the following pages, which I now lay before them, and examined them with the most critical eye, they will not I apprehend be disappointed. The impartial review taken of three parts of the Globe, and the observations made on the Voyage (which being nearly two years) must be pleasing to those who are not acquainted with a Foreign Country. This being the first Voyage that I have made to that Country (and being young in the seafaring business) I was induced to keep a daily journal, from my departure, until my return; which is contained in the following Epistle. By the desire of a few friends, the subscriber is induced to put it to Press for Public examination, in hopes that it will please some, and give information to others. As such he flatters himself it will be received, which will amply reward his sufferings.

I SAILED from Boston on board the India Packet, August 29th, 1796, with pleasant weather, winds N.E.; Steering our course S.E.*

September 18th

On our course for Cape Horn the Southern extremity of South America; pleasant weather, light gales of wind attended with a little rain.

October 11th

Nothing material happened. Now have the N.E. Trades fresh.

*October 5th**

Some little disturbances in the Ship as is Natural to suppose, there being five different languages on board. I beginning to make a little proficiency in Navigation.

Sunday, October 25th

In Lt. 6. S. steering our course S.E. by S. we discovered those remarkable clouds called the Magellan clouds, supposed to take their name from being discovered by Magellan and are actually about vertical with the Straits of Magellan. The number of these clouds are three and perhaps the greatest curiosity ever* eye beheld. One of them is jet black, the others white. Perhaps the curious reader will query about the truth of this relation. Hundreds are the number of we hardy Seamen, that have been eye witness of the same. To entertain the reader with a further description of these clouds. They revolve* round each other in their several orbits. Their appearance is always plain unless obstructed by a cloudy horizon,* and always in the same place except revolving.*

Sunday, October 30th

Morning fair but soon found our horizon obstructed by clouds, a melancholy scene to behold; there came on a gale of wind; finding ourselves in eminent* danger of being foundered. As the gale increased we soon found our fore topmast about our ears, carried close down to the cap. In replacing the fore topmast we unfortunately lost our main top gallantmast. The reader will naturally* suppose our situation really distressing, and had it not been for the greatest exertion we must unavoidably have perished.**

Saturday, November 5th

All an entire calm; nothing material today.

Sunday, November 6th

Lt. 45,0.58 m. S. very boisterous weather; a great variety of birds; some surprising whales seen in those latitudes.

November 20th

By observation we supposed ourselves not far distant from Cape Horn. In the Lt. 55 S. frequently seeing seals of an enormous size, and every kind of animal natural to the South Seas.

Thursday, December 2d

And then discovered Cape Horn bearing N. from us. We had a very tedious time of it in getting up with the Cape, but now have very fine weather for this latitude. We find ourselves becalmed at this time, but soon have a breeze of wind and continue our course to the southward.

Dec. 9th

In Lt. 59,0 30 m. S. we discovered an astonishing Mountain of ice, that we found to be by our Quadrants four miles in height, and supposed to be twentyfour in circumference. Among the curiosities in the South Sea this is considered one of the greatest. However incredible this may appear, kind reader, yet history will confirm it. Catching some Albatrosses twenty feet from one wing to the other. One very remarkable thing in this latitude, is that the sun is to be seen nineteen hours out of twentyfour, and plain day light continually.*

Sunday December 25th

Nothing particular occurred. We have now shaped our course for the N.W. Coast of America which is N.N.W.*

January 1st, 1797

By observation find ourselves in Lt. 25,0 30 m. S. nigh the Tropic Line. We now begin to think of preparing ourselves for the N.W. Indians, where we intend to procure our furs.*

Distressing is our situation on account of bad provisions by the neglect of the owners of the Ship, confined to three small biscuits per day, and three pints

of water. In this situation for three months, with a small allowance of beef.

Indulgent reader do not let me tire your patience with unnecessary prolixity for the want of good style* being bred* without it, and but little chance for improvement.*

Saturday, Jan. 14th

We have now crossed the Equator and find ourselves in Lt. 6 N. In taking a great many sea Turtle are tolerably well furnished for provision. We suffered a great deal for the want of water; but this day have had a very fine shower of rain, which furnished us with a good supply. The sharks are surprisingly plenty in this latitude; some of them are so ravenous that while our beef is towing along side, which necessity requires, they take it away net and all.*

I have some occasion to complain of our Captain on the account of usage; his committing assault and battery on a number of the crew, is something I dont so well relish, but am not in a situation to seek my redress at present, but anxiously wait the arrival of the time, in which I will acquaint him that I took umbrage* at it, and shall with the greatest propriety seek my redress.*

Sunday, January 21st

Steering N.W. by N. by observation found ourselves in Lt. 15 N. Nothing material occurred.*

Saturday, February 18th

We are now in Lt. 49° 33 N. Being distressed with a terrible gale of wind, of course excited some alarm in us, for the seas run mountains high, and to appearance should have our ship covered, dashing and beating as if she would go to pieces every moment. Feel for us, reader, in this situation, what must the feelings within our breast be, expecting to go to the bottom every minute; but through divine assistance and a little of our own exertions we soon cleared ourselves of fear, got our sails all in, and our yards and mast down on deck. In this situation we remained about forty eight hours, and then the storm abated so that in a short time we found ourselves in our

usual situation. Kind reader, I acknowledge we had great reason to thank Neptune the governor of the Seas.

Tuesday, February 21st, 1797.

We this morning had the good fortune to discover land at 18 Leagues distance, and after three days sail up into Norfolk Sound and come to anchor, after being at Sea about six months. Norfolk Sound is in Lat. 58° 5 N. Long. not ascertained, but thought to be in about 129 E. We soon were encompassed* about with canoes with 20, some 30 Indians in each. Not lying but about a mile from the shore we had traffic enough. After wooding, and watering, and repairing, we weighed our anchor and sailed for Mearses Bay,* about 3° to the Southward; had very good success in trade, found furs plenty, being the first ship on the Coast this season, purchased our furs advantageously; after lying at anchor about 20 days, set sail for Charlotte's Island, about 1° to the Southward; after arriving there was visited by a great number of canoes, but could not trade much on account of the boisterous weather. At our arrival at this place, we let go our anchor, but on account of the gales that are prevalent here, were obliged* to heave it up, and make sail seven times in the space of 24 hours. We then thought best to sail for Skiticus* still further to the Southward, the distance about 40 miles. After arriving, we came to anchor, and find here a large Village rather a metropolis of this Nation, where we purchased three hundred skins.*

Thursday, March 16th

We have had the good fortune to procure eleven hundred skins best prime. After setting sail from this, we shape our course for Norfolk Sound. On arriving in Norfolk Sound, we spoke the ship Dispatch, Capt. Bowers, from Boston, under way out of the Sound; all hands in good spirits, excepting one sick with the scurvey, a disorder which I suffered much from. You may well conceive with what raptures we embraced* one another, they being the first christian people we have seen since we left Boston; the Dispatch being bound to Mearses Bay, we tacked ship, and went in company with them.*

On our arrival at the Bay, we found lying there Capt. Trotter, in a brig from Providence, likewise the brig Hazzard from Boston, sloop Capt. Lay, master. We had no particular news from them, all were well. We here had good success in purchasing furs. Weighed anchor and set sail for Norfolk Sound; arriving there, we got a supply of wood and water; we then purchased a few furs.

The reader will not consider me too minute in mentioning so often our purchasing furs, as they were the only object of our Voyage, the number of skins purchased was 2200 and upwards. The Natives of the N.W. part of this Country are very much alike in their manners, they speak a number of languages; they are a hardy robust set of people, about a middle size, resembling our Indian very much, of a tawny complexion.*

A short description of the animals may attract the attention of the reader. 1st. The sea animal, the Elephant about the size of a large ox, when full grown, utters a terrible roaring that at times will excite alarm in any human creature; principally of a vermillion* color. 2d. The sea Lion and sea Dog, are not much unlike except the Lion vastly the largest. The fowl kind are extremely numerous such as Geese, Turkeys, Brants, Ducks, of every kind, the Eagle and Pelican, the largest of the feathered race, in these Northern and unexplored regions. The sea Otter, that valuable animal, eminent* for its fine fur. In Cook's performances, these skins were sold in China for 100 Dollars per skin, but we sold them for 25 or 30.*

May 31st, 1797

We set sail for China steering S.S.W. with a fine breeze.

India Packet, June 30th, 1797

We continue on our passage for China, with a brisk wind, steering S.W. in Lat. 30 N. Two of our men are taken with the scurvey, a disorder very common in such a voyage.

I.P., July 7th

In Lat. 21 N. we lost our main and fore top mast in a very heavy squall of wind; we however, replaced them very soon.

I.P., July 24th

In Lat. 14 N. L. 144° 30, seven of our crew have the scurvy, very bad, including our chief officer. We have been becalmed about 18 days; but have now a breeze of wind.

I.P., July 30th

We had the fortune to discover the Island Tinnian at 5 A.M. and got in with it at two P.M. We came to anchor and sent our boat on shore with the sick to the number of seven; left them and brought off* a fine Bullock, and five hundred oranges, a number of cocoanuts, and several hogs. The animals on this Island are entirely wild, were put on here by Anson,* a Spaniard, in circumnavigating the Island Tinnian, is in Lat. 14° 8 N.W. Long. 145 with several adjacent Islands. Agragan, Saipan, &c.*

*Thursday, July 16th**

This day we set sail for China, all in good spirits, a passage in which nothing material happened. After being in the Red Sea a few days, and passing through the thousand Islands arrived at Macow. Macow is situated at the mouth of the river Ta, or yellow River. We there came to anchor; after setting sail for Canton we arrived in Wambo harbour in 48 hours, the distance being 85 miles; we there came to anchor after three months passage from the N.W. Coast of America.

Wambo Harbour, September 1st, 1797

The trade of Wambo. As to the trade of this Country, it is rendered something difficult on account of their precarious dispositions, being ever open and ready to accept of every advantage as robbing, pilfering, &c. &c. Their mode of worshipping is something very peculiar; they burn incense night and morning; continually offering up sacrifices to the Deity, or to use their Language to Jose. There are immense numbers that are born and live on the waters until they die. It is supposed that there are one Million that live on the waters continually. It is too well known in this Country to enter into a long history of the Chinese or their manners in general.*

I do not wish to tire the reader with intrinsic circumstances; but after disposing of our furs for money, purchased ourselves a Cargo of Teas and a few China curiosities, we set sail for Boston, the 12th of November 1797. Some apologies are necessary in this case, but when the reader is become acquainted with the circumstances he will be kind enough to excuse me for not continuing my journal in a regular manner as I intended. In the commencing of the Voyage I had the misfortune of being sick the most part of the time after I left China, unable to write. So I shall endeavour to satisfy the reader, as far as possible.

*November 17th**

Lost sight of land on our passage for America. After sailing through the China Seas and down the coast of Africa, through the straits of Balaboam* by Javahead for ninety days we arrived at the Cape of Goodhope, the Southern extremity of Africa. In Lat. 34° 30 S. Canton lying in 23 N. the reader may easily estimate the Distance. The Cape of Goodhope is the garden of Africa, it being very pleasantly situated and the most spacious Bay in the world lying before the town. This town was taken by the Dutch a long time since from the Hottentots, but was three years since captured by the English; and now is in the hands of them and guarded by as large a fleet for the place as any in the known world. We found cause to lie in this place ten days on account of our sick. We had the misfortune to lose three of our people on our passage from China, one of them third mate. We find here a variety of people: English, Dutch, Hottentots, too numerous to mention. One curiosity is the Hottentots sheep, of an enormous size; their tails are said to weigh 25 lb. I have seen them to weigh 15 lb. The fowl kind, the Ostrich are found here in plenty, the Cassowaries* are seen here, an extraordinary fowl. The Cassowaries are about the size of the Ostrich, not unlike them except their wings and bristles.*

February 3d

This morning set sail for Boston, leaving one of our men sick at the Cape, and after coming to, at the Island*

Ascension to get a little refreshment by fish and turtle.* We set sail for Boston. A description may not be disagreeable to the indulgent reader. It is in Lat. 8 S. a continued clift of rocks, about 24 miles in circumference. Destitute of inhabitants or any animal except rats, and them without number of an enormous size. Of fowl kind is found here the man of war bird, and Gull in plenty. The turtle of this place are very large, some weighing 900 lb. It being within about 8° of the Equinoctial line, S. is well adapted to them. The turtle furnished us with the most delicious dish being a variety of meats in them. For brevity sake I must leave this subject and continue a sketch of the passage from China to America.*

February the 24th, 1798

We weighed our anchor for the last time with joyful hearts, and set sail for Boston steering W.N.W.

I.P., March 15th, 1798

Continuing our passage to Boston N.E. trades steering W.N.W. by observation find ourselves in 23° 30 m. North about the tropic line.

April 1st, 1798

By observation we find ourselves in Lat. 30° 24 m. upon a parallel with the W. I. Islands. Nothing particular occurred.

April 7th

We came in sight of land through mistake. We got into Marblehead harbour owing to the fog which was very heavy. We there took a pilot and directed our course for Boston, where we arrived the 10th after a passage of 137* days from China.*

*For two long years upon the main**
Each toil and danger I went through
in hopes to see my native shore again:
The whistling winds began to blow,
Where to fix my mind I did not know!

When duty called I began to bid adieu
But stil to myself and country true,
A sailor's life a life, of woe
Now up and down, to and fro!

Blest with Neptune smiles we fly
To rise seas running mountains high,
Though pearls threat around
All sense of danger drown'd!

But think not our case is hard,
For coming home is a sweet reward;
Our sails when in harbour is furl'd
Then each brave fellow for his girl!

The deck we clear
Then three times cheer,
Our am'rous toast
Here we love most!

This world is a stage
On which mankind engage,
A labyrinth of woe
Wandering for they know not who!

FINIS.

NOTES

With the minor exceptions indicated by asterisks and explained below, the text is printed as in the original; the very odd punctuation (which may be the fault of the printer) has been "normalized."

August 29: stearing (also elsewhere).

October 5: 15th?

October 25: Magelen—every—revole—horrizon (also elsewhere)

October 30: obstucted—emi nant—natural—must unavoidable perished.

December 9: Albetrosses.

December 25: occured.

January 1: prepairing—prolixty—stile—bread.

January 14: toing—acquaint—umbridge.

January 21: meterial.

February 21: Norfolk Sound is now Sitka Sound, Alaska. The latitude is correct but the longitude wildly inaccurate; it should be 135.30 W.—was incompassed—Mearses Bay (Meare's Port after John Meares, 1756?-1809) is now Cordova Bay at the southernmost extremity of Prince of Wales Island off the Alaska panhandle—was obliged—Skiticus is Skidegate about half way down the Queen Charlotte Islands.

March 16: hundered—imbraced—to—utter—vermilion—eminant.

July 30: Tinian is one of the Mariana Islands; another is Saipan. By Agragan Johnson probably means Agrihan.—brought of—By Anson Johnson presumably means the British Admiral George Anson (1697-1762) who put in at Tinian during his voyage around the world fighting the Spanish in 1740-44.

July 16th—August 16th?

September 1: Usually spelled joss.

November 17: Johnson has October 17.—Africa is of course an error, unless Johnson has merely muddled the order of his sentence.—The Straits of Balaboam are the Sunda Straits between Sumatra and Java.—Cassovarous—brustles.

February 3: coming too—Asanchiant (4.57 S and 14.22 W)—turkle (also in the following).

April 7: Marblehead is 15 miles north of Boston.—Counting back 137 days from April 10 would mean that Johnson left Canton on November 24 and not November 12. It may be that he is discounting days in port.

The poem has been left as in the original except that line 2 is there broken after the word see.

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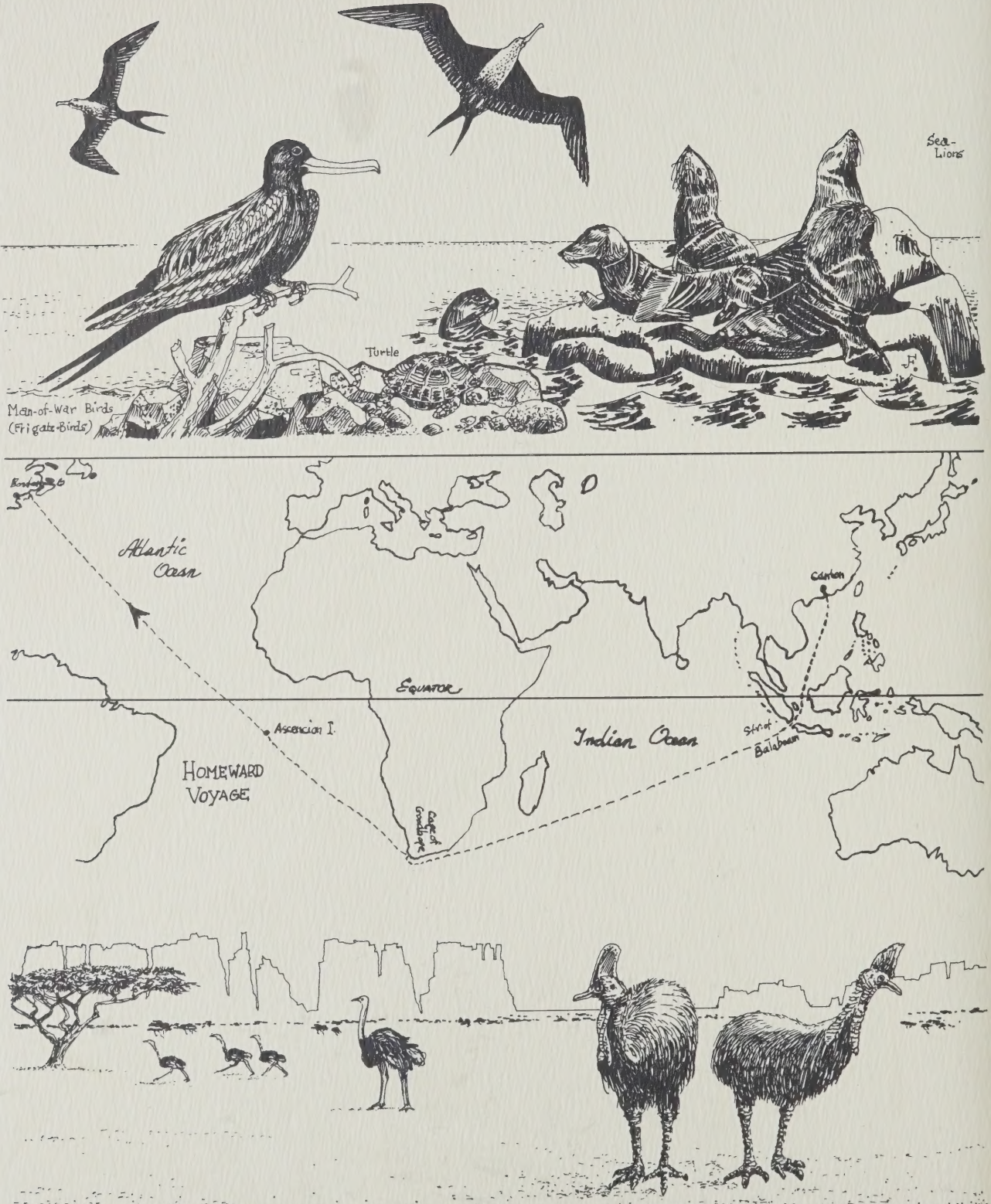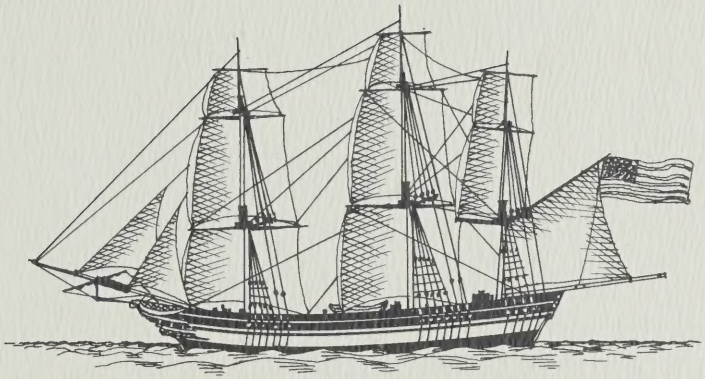
Sea-Lions
Turtle
Man-of-War Birds
(Frigate-Birds)
Atlantic Ocean
Ascension I.
HOMEWARD VOYAGE
EQUATOR
Indian Ocean
Ostriches
Cassowaries